

1860—Lincoln; Debs—1905. *→ 1895*

A Remarkable Article Written in 1895 by the Great
New York Journalist—John Swinton.

WHEN Eugene Victor Debs came to New York from Chicago last year he made a speech in Cooper Union which I heard. I sat near a spot at which I had sat at another meeting held in the same place, thirty-four years previously, which was addressed by another speaker who came to New York from Chicago. The western speaker who stood on that platform in August, 1894, was to me a reminder of the other western speaker who stood there in February, 1860. Both men were tall and spare in figure; the complexion of each rather dark—darker in the one than in the other; the face of each was rather gaunt, that of the earlier speaker much more gaunt than that of the later; both were men of good and strong features; there was something intense about the facial expression of each; both were men of commanding and impressive manners.

I recall the somewhat peculiar and shrill voice of the speaker of 1860; I heard another voice in 1894 which resembled it. As they spoke, it was easy for a New Yorker to discern that they were both men of the west.

The man to whose speech I listened in Cooper Union in February, of 1860 was Abraham Lincoln, of Illinois—born in Kentucky; the man who spoke from the same platform within my hearing last year was Eugene Victor Debs, of Illinois—born in Indiana.

I recalled the appearance, the manner, the voice and the speech of Lincoln as Debs stood before me thirty-four years afterwards.

It seemed to me that both men were imbued with the same spirit. Both seemed to me as men of judgment, reason, earnestness and power. Both seemed to me as men of free, high, genuine, generous manhood. I "took" to Lincoln in my early life, as I took to Debs a third of a century later.

In the speeches of both westerners there was cogent argument; there were apt illustrations; there were especially emphatic passages; there were moments of lightning; there were touches of humor, and there were other qualities which produce conviction or impel to action. Each speaker was as free as the other from gross eloquence. I confess that I was as much impressed with the closing words of Debs' speech as I was with those of Lincoln, when he exclaimed, "Let us have faith that right makes right, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty, as we understand it."

As Lincoln stands in my memory while looking far back, Debs stands in it as I saw him in Cooper Union a year ago.

Lincoln spoke for man; so spoke Debs. Lincoln spoke for right and progress; so spoke Debs. Lincoln spoke for the freedom of labor; so spoke Debs. Lincoln was the foe of human slavery; so is Debs.

I was in the deepest sympathy with Lincoln when he came here, as I was also with Debs when he came here. I had striven for Fremont in my youth, as I have striven in later years for principles that are the logical sequence of those of Lincoln and are represented by Debs.

Let no admirer of Abraham Lincoln—I do not mean the apotheosized emancipator, but the Lincoln of 1860—offer objection to aught that has been here said. At the time I have spoken of Lincoln was regarded by millions of people as a cross between a crank and a monster. In hundreds of papers and by hundreds of speakers he was called the "Illinois baboon." Every epithet that hate could invent was applied to him; every base purpose that malice could conceive was imputed to him. To the "Satanic press" of New York Lincoln was an object of loathing and derision, a "nigger lover," a clown, a subverter of the constitution and the law; and above all, he was a blatant fool who would destroy that indestructible "system of labor" which had existed of old, which was upheld by the supreme court and the lynch law court, the church, the army, the press and the capitalist, as also by congress—both houses. Why, the Debs whom we have with us in

our country today is a harmless citizen compared with the Lincoln of 1860, as he had been described before he came to New York. It looks to me as though the newspaper slubberdegullions and plutocracy in our time had lost that power of cantankerous invective which was possessed by their contemporaries of 1860, now mostly dead and forgotten. I have read some assaults upon Debs, but all of them were poorly done.

Lincoln's name was less familiar to New York masses at the opening of 1860 than Debs' was in 1894. Lincoln had campaigned in the west, but the west was much farther away then than it is now, and western men were less known in the east than they are now. Lincoln drew a crowd to Cooper Union, but not as large a crowd as Debs drew.

Well, when I heard Debs' speech here I had half a notion that it might be the prelude to an incident like that which followed Lincoln's speech. There were few people, at least in New York, who could have believed that within three months from the day of Lincoln's speech here, Lincoln would be a candidate for the office of President of the United States. "Some say," he said while in New York then, "some say they may make me Vice President with Seward."

It was always the opinion of my old friend Raymond, the founder of the New York Times, whom I long served as chief of his editorial staff, that it was the Cooper Union speech of Lincoln that made it possible for him to be a candidate for the presidency, and that it was most potent in making him acceptable to the Republican party in the east. It certainly was a factor of influence in the nomination in Chicago the following May.

No matter about that now. When, in Cooper Union, a year ago, I heard the speech of Eugene V. Debs, which, in so many ways, reminded me of that of Abraham Lincoln long ago, I felt sure that nobody could deny that here again, in this new western leader in the struggle for labor's emancipation, there might be the stuff for a presidential candidate.

And this suggestion would have been made by me at the New York meeting but for the jam of perversity on the platform.

Debs in Cooper Union reminded me of Lincoln there. As Lincoln, of Illinois, became an efficient agent for freedom, so, perchance might Debs, of Indiana, become in the impending conflict for the liberation of labor. Let us never forget Lincoln's great words, "Liberty before property; the man before the dollar."

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